

'Tis the Damn Season by maplestreet83

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Angst, F/M, Holidays, Home for Christmas, Inspired by Music, Post-Break Up, Song: 'tis the damn season (Taylor Swift), but nothing is really different apart from modern phones, rated T for some swearing

Language: English

Characters: Erica Sinclair, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield

Relationships: Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-01-02

Updated: 2021-07-23

Packaged: 2022-03-31 10:29:41

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 5

Words: 15,515

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

For the first time since she moved back to California for college, Max is back in Hawkins for the holidays. She said it was just so she could spend some time with her mom, but maybe there's someone else she also wouldn't mind meeting again. And being back in the small town again after years away makes her wonder about the roads not taken.

A Lumax AU inspired by "'tis the damn season" by Taylor Swift

1. There's an ache in you, put there by the ache in me

Author's Note:

As soon as I heard this song I knew I needed to write a Lumax fic about it. And when Anna (@rosekings) said it reminded her of Back to You? I knew I needed to get to writing. So here we go, a "'tis the damn season' inspired Lumax fic, with some inspiration from my fic Back to You, and just to make things even more complicated, set in vague modern day because why not? (honestly it was just to have the convenience of texting in couple parts and that's about it ahahhs) I hope you like it! I'll be posting the first two chapters today and the rest tomorrow and the day after. Happy new year!

December 23rd

The cardboard cup of coffee was warm as Max wrapped her freezing fingers around it, her hands still cold from having to scrape the windows of the car free of the ice that had collected there over the cold December night. She'd hoped there would be snow to greet her when she flew back to Hawkins, but there was none, only dark frozen ground and a cold wind that clung to your bones for hours after you got inside. The AC of the car was slow as hell and the cup of diner coffee was still the warmest thing in the car even though Max had set the vents to blow out warm air for twenty minutes already. She knew she should've been grateful for her mom for letting her use her old car while she was in town. She had sold Max's old car when she'd moved to California for college, which made sense of course, but it didn't mean that Max didn't miss it. The car and the memories that came with it.

But it was fine. The car was fine, the slightly burnt coffee from the only diner in town was fine, the freezing cold December air was fine, she was fine.

Her mom had been surprised when she'd said she'd come stay with her for the holidays, as she'd spent the last two Christmases in

California with her dad. And Max was a little surprised herself too, not really sure why exactly she'd come, Indiana in December wasn't the most appealing place to be, especially after the pleasant warmth that had settled over San Diego after another blisteringly hot summer.

But there was something deep in Max's chest that had told her to come back, if only for a couple of days. A nostalgia of some kind maybe? For the quiet small-town streets and the lonely vastness of the corn fields that stretched out to the horizon. But there was something else too, a selfish, ulterior motive that had brought her to sit in the car at the parking lot of Hawkins High, holding her cup of coffee and biting her lip as she kept checking the rearview mirror, waiting. She almost hoped he wouldn't show. She didn't know what had gotten into her that night last month, seeing him post an old picture of all of them for Dustin's birthday. For some reason that had ignited that nostalgic ache in her chest, made her text him for the first time since who knows how long. Made her tell him she was coming back for the holidays, that she would like to catch up. Was it selfish and out-of-the-blue? Yes. They'd been broken up since the end of high school, and it had been fine like that. But even though she knew better, she had still let herself wonder...

His car turned from the road and onto the parking lot, and Max's grip on the cup of coffee tightened as she tried to keep her face neutral. This was just two old friends getting coffee and catching up, her heartbeat had no right to quicken like that. He parked one spot away from her – a respectful, appropriate distance – and got out the car – also his mom's, Max couldn't help but note. He pulled up his coat collar higher against the freezing air and then he looked at her across the windshield, giving her a short wave, and goddamn. It had been almost three years. Why did seeing him still make her feel like this.

"Hi," Lucas said as he opened the passenger's side door and got in. His voice was casual, matching the tone Max had told him this meeting would have. But it was still warm, and kind, and his, and the polite smile he gave her was so familiar Max felt like she was falling apart.

"Hey," she replied, trying her best to match his conversational tone while she felt her throat drying up. Must've been the cold dry air.

“I um, got us coffee, from Benny’s,” Max quickly added, wanting to keep the conversation going, scared of what a silence would bring up. She handed Lucas a cup she’d placed on the holder between the front seats.

“I hope it’s not gotten cold,” she added as he took it.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” he replied politely, turning around the cardboard cup to look at it. The cup was decorated with tacky snowman designs straight from the 80s, and Max cringed.

“Sorry, these were the only cups they had, I hope the coffee’s not as old,” she apologized but Lucas just smiled faintly, shaking his head.

“It’s fine, I don’t mind it. It’s festive.” He turned to look at her as he spoke, ever the one to try and see the best in things.

“Yeah, ‘tis the season, I guess,” she replied with a shrug, picking up her cup of coffee as well.

“It sure is,” Lucas said, and it took Max an awkward second too long to realize he was extending over his cup of coffee towards her to cheers with her.

“Oh, um, yeah, Christmas,” Max mumbled, hurriedly reaching over and clanking the cardboard of the cup together with his, miraculously managing not to spill any.

They sat quietly for a while, drinking from their cups and looking across the grey empty parking lot at the school, the frayed flag in the flagpole in front of the entrance flapping in the cold wind, the tiger mural on the brick wall cracked from the edges. Max had never thought of herself as someone who missed her time in high school. She knew some people in her college friend group that still visited their old schools when they went home, some even kept in touch with teachers. It made her pity them in some way, seeing them clinging onto a time that was gone and never coming back. But now here she was, sitting in the high school parking lot in the middle of the day, two days before Christmas. But it really wasn’t the school she’d missed.

“Sorry I was a little late, by the way,” Lucas spoke up after a while, pulling down the zip of his coat a bit, the air in the car had finally warmed up a bit.

“I had to go get some groceries for my mom and I didn’t think the lines would be so long.”

“Where did you go, Big Buy?” Max asked, looking over at him. Her guess had a 50/50 chance of being correct, since there were only two grocery stores in Hawkins.

“Yeah, and half of town seemed to be there getting stuff for Christmas,” Lucas replied, taking another sip of coffee. He hummed, halfway through a sip, speaking as soon as he’d lowered the cup from his lips.

“I saw Mr. Clarke!”

“No way! How was he? Haven’t seen him since graduation,” Max asked, genuinely surprised and curious.

“He’s good, still got the mustache,” Lucas said and Max huffed out a laugh, looking down at the cup in her hand.

“And he’s married now, I met his wife too,” he added and Max nodded, a mix of surprised and impressed.

“You didn’t get an invitation to the wedding though, how does it feel?” she asked Lucas, a familiar edge of sarcasm in her voice.

“Broke my heart, truly. I was so close to causing a scene right there on the dairy isle,” Lucas lamented, shaking his head as he took another sip of coffee. Max chuckled, setting her elbow on the car window, leaning her head on her hand. The air in the car was lighter now, but the ache was still there, the nostalgia, the melancholy she still couldn’t quite name. She sighed, looking out the window at the greyness outside.

“How’s it feel being back?” Lucas asked her, his voice curious, but not in a probing way. Like he wasn’t asking just for the sake of

making conversation, but like he really wanted to hear what she had to say. Attentive, observant, and understanding as ever.

“It’s...weird. It’s nice seeing my mom again, spending time with her,” Max started, still looking out the window but seeing from the side of her eye as Lucas nodded as he listened to her.

“How is she? Hope she’s doing well,” he asked.

“She’s good. I think she’s seeing someone. She didn’t say it straight out, but she did say she’s going to visit a friend on Christmas Day and staying the night in the city. And apparently that friend’s name is Roger,” Max explained, looking down as she picked at the plastic coffee cup lid. There was a beat of silence and Max realized Lucas was hesitant to reply to that. Things had always been complicated with her family, first with her parents’ divorce and then the divorce of her mom and stepdad. That had happened during Freshman year and after the mess it had been, Max’s mom hadn’t really dated anyone since. But she seemed happy now, and Max was feeling hopeful. So she turned to Lucas to show that she was okay with it, shrugging and saying:

“He would be named Roger, right?”

“Right,” he echoed, seeming relieved for her, his tensed up shoulders dropping a bit.

“Hi kids, this is Mom’s new friend, Roger’, sounds like a classic,” he added and Max let out a short laugh.

“What about your dad?” Lucas asked.

“He’s good too, spending Christmas in Hawaii now that he didn’t have to worry about having me around.”

“Hawaii sounds nice,” Lucas said with a wistful sigh, looking out at the grey weather outside.

“But it’s no Hawkins. Where else could you get this delicious coffee?” Max exclaimed, lifting her cup and taking a sip, wincing just a bit after. It really was bitter. Lucas let out a soft laugh at her cringing face, picking up his cup and turning it in his hands, attentively

examining the dancing snowmen on it. And Max was examining him, the gentle but steady way his fingers held the cup, the set of his brow and the gaze of his deep eyes as he looked at it. His lips, slightly chapped from the cold winter air.

“Remember when we used to go eat at Benny’s after my home games?” he spoke up, his eyes still on the coffee cup. Max nodded. Of course she remembered.

“But only the ones we lost, because when we won the whole team would go to celebrate there and they were obnoxious and you didn’t like them,” he added, setting the coffee cup into the cup holder, a smirk at the corner of his lips. Max huffed.

“I liked them fine,” she defended herself, but the defense was weak and they both knew it.

“Come on, it’s been three years, you can admit that you hated them,” Lucas said, rolling his head to the side to glance at her.

“Not all of them. Just Zach and Colby and Mike C,” Max explained. Lucas did an exaggerated shudder.

“Mike C, don’t remind me. It’s been a good three years not having to look at his arrogant bigoted face.”

“I was surprised we didn’t run into him here, he’d be just the type to hang around school trying to relive his glory days,” Max commented and Lucas nodded.

“Oh yeah, I can totally see that. But maybe he’s scheduled his nostalgia trip after ours,” he said, taking another sip of coffee. His ‘ours’ carved a hole into Max’s chest in the place where their ‘ours’ had once been.

“I’d always get a strawberry shake,” Max spoke up after a minute of silence passed between them. Lucas looked over at her, it taking him a second to get what she was talking about.

“And you’d get vanilla, and I’d make fun of you for going with the

safe bland option,” she continued.

“But you’d still drink half of it,” Lucas pointed out.

“And you’d always let me.”

“I would,” Lucas said and Max turned to meet his eyes. They were steady and warm and just slightly pained as they held hers, and she could so clearly imagine the dingy diner booth around them, smell the fried food and coffee and linoleum, feel the melancholic resignation of a lost game hanging over him, wanting to remind him that it was okay, that it didn’t matter. That even if he didn’t have the championship, he’d always have her.

“I miss it,” she said, her voice quiet, the deeper message in it delicate as it hung in the air between them. Keeping her eyes on his, Max begged him to not make her say it out loud. Because she wasn’t sure she could. She wasn’t sure if her pride could take that hit. But beneath that pride was the ache, the painful, nostalgic, wistful ache that wanted to rip right out of her chest and fall right into his arms. And as she held his gaze, she could see the ache was there too, beneath the sensible hesitation and uncertainty built by the last three years. Her mouth fell open just slightly, a silent plea for him to be the first to do it, to give her the chance at deniability once the holidays were over.

One more heartbeat passed as her pale eyes were locked with his dark ones, and then he took the leap she was coaxing out of him, the worn material of his seat creaking as he leaned towards her, the touch of his hand warm on her cheek as he drew her lips to his. Max hastily set her coffee into the cup holder, eagerly twisting in her seat to face him better, returning the kiss as her hands found the lapels of his coat, wanting to feel him there next to here, even if it was just for a couple of days.

2. You could call me "babe" for the weekend

December 24th

“Lucas? Which one?” By the annoyance in her voice, Lucas could guess it wasn’t the first time Erica had asked that. He set his phone down onto the couch next to him, looking up at his sister who was standing by the Christmas tree, looking impatient, holding two different sparkly garlands.

“Um, the left one?” he supplied, trying to contribute.

“Nah, the right one goes better with the ornaments,” Erica said, dropping the other garland back into the box of decorations and going to hang the one she’d picked onto the tree.

“You need to focus or we’ll never get this done by tomorrow,” she told Lucas as she rose up to her tiptoes to set the garland higher.

“I don’t know why you even need my help here, clearly you know what to do,” Lucas pointed out, sinking back into the couch.

“Decorating the tree together on Christmas Eve is a tradition and you know it! You’re not getting out of this!” Erica explained, grabbing a messy tangly ball of silver tinsel garland and throwing it his way. Lucas took it and started to untangle it in resignation. Suddenly he heard his phone buzz next to him and quickly picked it up to see... that it was just a Christmas greeting from Aunt Tessa.

“Who are you waiting for a text from? You’ve been checking your phone like a hundred times a minute,” Erica asked as she picked out more ornaments.

“I uh, might be going out tonight, but I’m not sure yet, I’m waiting to hear back about it,” Lucas explained, trying to be as vague as possible.

“Okay. Tell your nerd friends I said hi,” Erica replied, and Lucas was relieved by how fast she dropped the subject.

It had barely been 24 hours since he’d met up with Max and he

wasn't in any way ready to talk to his family about what had happened. He wasn't really sure about it himself. What he knew was that whatever it was that had begun when she'd reached out to him for the first time in years, had somehow led to them kissing in her mom's old car in the middle of the empty Hawkins High parking lot. He'd be lying if he said he hadn't been secretly wishing and hoping that could happen again. It'd been almost three years since they broke up and it had been a mutual decision, the practical thing to do as they headed off to colleges in the opposite sides of the country, and he'd been fine with it, willing to let her go. But there was that tiny part of him, fueled by nostalgia, that sometimes wondered about the what ifs. About what could happen, the directions life could take them in the future. And that tiny thought in the back of his mind had been steadily growing since she texted him last month, so that by yesterday as he was driving through town to the school, it was a steady aching presence, thrumming right under his skin, wound up with curiosity, nerves and maybe misplaced hope.

And then she'd been right there, her eyes reflecting the pale grey December sky as they held onto his, held him captive, and he couldn't say no to her, he never could. Half an hour later, when his mom had texted him, asking when he was going to be home with the groceries, they'd parted ways, Lucas scrambling out the car, too embarrassed all of a sudden to meet Max's eyes. But as he'd walked back to his car, she'd given him a wave and a soft smile before driving away, and the memory of that smile had filled all his thoughts for the past 24 hours. He hadn't asked her how long she was going to be in town, but probably for a couple more days at least. He really wanted to see her again.

"I can't find the tree topper anywhere," Erica sighed in annoyance, rifling through the box of decorations.

"I think it's in the garage, Mom said there's one more box of Christmas stuff there," Lucas remembered, getting up from the couch, figuring he'd find something to do while waiting by the phone.

"I'll go get it."

Halfway to the bottom of the big box of decorations, Lucas was holding a big ceramic candle holder and almost dropped it on the

concrete floor of the garage when his phone buzzed with a new message. Clumsily setting the candle holder back down into the box, hoping it wouldn't break, he took his phone out of his pocket, almost embarrassed by how quickly his heartbeat had picked up. But that embarrassment was soon forgotten when he saw Max had sent him a text.

“it’s snowing!!”

Lucas rushed out the garage to the nearest window in the hallway. She was right. It wasn't much, but still a steady fall of small snowflakes barely sticking to the frozen ground. He smiled to himself, knowing how excited Max always got at the first snow of the year. Just the first snow though, when it piled up and turned to sludge, she wasn't that big of a fan anymore. His phone buzzed again and he realized he hadn't replied to her.

“get ready, i'll be there in ten minutes to pick you up”

“to do what?”

“to go look at the snow!”

The smile on Lucas's face widened as he typed a reply, saying he'd see her soon.

“So? Where to?” Lucas asked Max as she drove them out of the suburbs, her gaze on the steadily falling snow, brightening the darkening winter air.

“I'm not sure... the weathertop maybe? Or the Christmas tree farm? The quarry could be cool too?” Max suggested, having to swerve just a bit as she was too fixated on the snow starting to steadily coat the trees lining the road.

“Woah, watch out, wherever we're going you want to get us there alive, right?” Lucas pointed out as she straightened the car.

“Don't worry, I've driven in the snow before,” Max reassured him.

“Yeah, but not in three years,” Lucas replied but she just rolled her eyes. But he knew her well enough to know there was no ill intent in it. Max had about ten different kinds of eye rolls, and he’d learned to tell the difference between all of them. He hoped he still knew how to do it.

“The Quarry sounds cool, it must be frozen over, with how cold it’s been lately,” Lucas said after a while and Max looked over at him, excitement radiating off of her as she nodded, agreeing to the plan.

When they got to the quarry, the sun peeking from between the clouds was already dropping into the horizon, and Max let out a sigh of appreciation as she killed the car engine, stopping it a few yards from the edge of the water. Lucas had to agree, the pale pinks and purples that the setting sun was painting into the clouds, mixed with the snowfall over the frozen surface of the water was quite an image. And as he turned to glance at Max, her eyes wide as she took in the view, he couldn’t help but let his heart warm at how glad he was to get to share it with her. After a moment she seemed to get out of her stupor, clicking open her seatbelt and opening the car door.

“Come on, let’s go see how thick the ice is!”

“I don’t think it’ll be thick enough for us to walk on it,” Lucas said and Max popped her head back into the doorway, tying her scarf on tighter.

“Wanna bet?” she asked, a mischievous glint in her eye and then slammed the door closed, leaving Lucas sitting in the car to try to figure out if she was being serious or not.

Lucas did end up convincing Max that it probably wasn’t the best idea to test the thickness of the ice cover by just walking onto it and hoping for the best. Instead they ended up climbing up onto one of the smaller cliffs surrounding the water and collecting snowballs from the little snow that had stuck to the ground and seeing who could throw them furthest onto the ice.

“Okay but you’re an athlete so that doesn’t count,” Max commented after Lucas managed to throw one of the snowballs especially far off onto the ice.

“I’m no athlete, I haven’t played basketball since school,” Lucas pointed out.

“So I won fair and square.”

Max rolled her eyes again, and this one Lucas knew to mean ‘okay fine but don’t rub it in.’ She groused down to pick up snow from the ground, but instead of quickly forming it into a ball to throw, she just collected it in her hands, forming it and breaking it up.

“I didn’t know you stopped playing,” she said after a while, getting up, still forming the snow in her hands.

“Yeah, it didn’t really fit into my study schedule. Plus, I was never really good enough to be in a college team,” Lucas explained, shrugging and putting his hands into his pockets. Being in the basketball team in high school had been fun, but he hadn’t been too upset when it had come time to quit.

“I thought you were good,” Max said, nudging his shoulder with hers.

“Thanks,” he replied, a small smile appearing on his face. It felt weird talking about it, his days playing high school basketball were way in the past. But it was true that having Max there, cheering him on and cursing out the refs and the opposite team, had been one of the best things about it.

“So what else have you been up to at college then, other than doing whatever engineers do?” Max asked, her tone lighthearted as they walked back down the incline from the cliff and towards the car and the edge of the frozen water.

“Not much I guess, I did an internship over the summer and I’ve been a member of some clubs but nothing serious,” Lucas explained.

“You didn’t join a frat? I thought having to deal with Mike C and Zach and not punching them every day would’ve been good practice for joining one,” Max commented with a smirk as they got to the car.

“That is a good point, but no. Didn’t really feel like my thing,” Lucas said, settling to lean against the hood of the car as Max went to get

something from the back seat. It was weird talking with her about their college lives like this. It wasn't like he was keeping secrets from her, they followed each other online so they got a basic picture of what the other was up to. He knew she'd been active with the student organizations at UC San Diego and she had seen the pictures he had posted of him and his roommates at Illinois Tech. But since they'd never really talked about it in detail, it had been like there was this strict separation between the time before and after they both left Hawkins. And talking about college like this was blurring that line. As was making out in a car for twenty minutes, but Lucas wasn't ready to think about that one yet.

"I raided the kitchen cupboards but there wasn't much that wasn't earmarked for Christmas, so..." Max said and Lucas heard her close the car door and she came over to the front where he was, holding a few miscellaneous items in her arms.

"We've got..." she started, her voice announcer-like and dramatic as she dumped the things she was holding onto the hood of the car.

"Half of a two-liter of Coke, probably a bit flat. Three clementine oranges and a bag of goldfish," she explained, and Lucas turned to look at the snacks.

"Woah you got us a feast!" he exclaimed, picking up a tangerine.

"But if you want to get real food, we can always go to Benny's?" he added.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure if they're open. With the holidays and all. Plus..." Max said, taking a pause to open the bag of goldfish before continuing:

"I'm vegetarian so no more double bacon burgers for me."

"Oh, since when?" Lucas asked, genuinely surprised. He had no idea. Max shrugged, picking a handful of crackers.

"Since the spring of Freshman year of college I guess, I don't remember when exactly."

"How's your mom taking that, with the Christmas turkey and all?"

“Well we’ve both always liked the sides better anyways so it’s no big deal,” Max explained, her tone lighthearted as she jumped up to sit on the hood of the car.

Lucas nodded along, starting to peel the orange. So another thing they didn’t know about each other. It wasn’t a big deal, but for some reason it stuck out to him. Reminding him of how little they really knew of each other these days. They knew each other from when they were in high school, but what about now? Lucas knew that he wasn’t the same person he’d been at eighteen, and he was sure it was the same with Max. What were they even doing? They didn’t really know each other, they were just trying to force an old dynamic that they maybe didn’t fit into anymore. Maybe she wouldn’t like this version of him he’d become and at any moment she’d realize the mistake she’d made when she’d asked him to meet up and...

“Hey, everything okay?” Max asked from beside him, bumping his arm with her elbow.

“Huh?” Lucas voiced, blinking his eyes, realizing he’d been staring out at the frozen water for who knows how long now.

“You were totally spacing out. You okay?” Max asked again, leaning forward to look at him.

“Yeah, just... Thinking about stuff,” Lucas replied, finishing peeling the orange and dropping the peels onto the hood next to him. What was he doing? There was no use of overthinking this, they’d only be home for the couple of days and then they’d go their separate ways again. Even if they’d both changed, if they didn’t go together anymore, it didn’t matter much, since they’d be separated again anyway.

“So umm, how long are you going to be in Hawkins?” Lucas asked after a minute. Max finished another handful of crackers, wiping the crumbs onto her jeans.

“Until New Years. And after then it’s back to San Diego,” she explained.

“What about you?” she added, turning to look at him. Lucas

recognized the hopeful tone in her voice, and his heart sank at it.

“We’ll be going to visit family for New Years, we’re leaving the morning of the 27th. And then I’m heading straight to Chicago after that.”

“Okay,” Max said, her tone casual, but Lucas knew they were both doing the same calculations right now. They had a little over two days.

They worked on the snacks in silence as the night fell around them, the snowfall getting heavier. After a while Max jumped down from the car hood, and Lucas figured she’d say they should get back in the car to warm up, she’d never been one for cold weather. But instead she walked back to the shore, looking up at the snowflakes falling from the sky above her. Lucas slowly made his way to the edge of the frozen water as well, pushing his cold hands into his pockets. When he reached Max, he too turned to look up at the now dark sky.

“Looking for anything?” he asked, glancing over at Max. She had her arms wrapped around herself, her scarf pulled up all the way to her nose, her cheeks bright red. She was definitely getting cold. Before Lucas could ask her if she wanted to start heading back, she spoke:

“When you asked me what it was like to be back in Hawkins and I said it was weird? Well that’s the least of it.”

“It’s just...” she paused, looking down and kicking the snowy ground.

“I’m happy in San Diego. I really am. With college and my friends there, and getting to see my dad, and going to the beach and not worrying about scraping the car windows every morning...”

“Lucky,” Lucas pointed out and Max huffed, glancing at him from the corner of her eye.

“But at the same time,” she continued, looking up at the dancing snowflakes again.

“When I’m here, I just feel... I don’t know. After graduation I pretty

much took the first flight out of here, escaping the first chance I got. But now that I'm back I just... I feel like I've still got unfinished business here. Like I'm not quite ready to move on from here."

Lucas nodded, looking up at the sky too.

"Well if we're talking interdimensional stuff, then I'm pretty sure that's all taken care of, I haven't seen any portals or anything..." he suggested, only half as a joke and Max huffed out a laugh, shoving his side.

"I know that's all over. Thank god. But maybe it's my mom, since she still lives here," she wondered. Lucas was about to add that there were also some other people who would always have ties to Hawkins, but didn't want to make the conversation weird. Instead he said:

"You did live here for five years Max, it's okay if you still want to come back here."

"What about you? What are you going to do after you're done with college? Are you planning on coming back here?" Max asked.

"Well, I don't..." Lucas stuttered. He really hadn't been expecting that.

"I don't know. I like Chicago. And it's not that much of a drive to come back home and visit," he answered. He really hadn't planned his life much past college. He knew he was going to apply for graduate school so that was going to take a couple more years. But beyond that? He really didn't know yet.

"But that's the difference. This is home to you. Right?" Max asked, turning to look at Lucas. There were snowflakes clinging to her eyelashes.

"It is, yeah," he answered honestly. Because it was the truth. He'd grown up in Hawkins. Whether he was going to settle down there or not, it was still going to be his hometown.

"I don't really know what to consider home," Max said, looking up at the night sky again, hugging herself tighter.

“I thought it was San Diego, but... With everything that has happened here, with everyone I’ve gotten to know here, everything we’ve been through together... I just...” Max paused, taking a deep breath, squeezing her eyes shut.

“I don’t know what I’m doing. Like, at all. And I thought I’d know it by now, we’re supposed to be adults but I have no fucking clue what’s going on or what I want to do in my life. And everyone else seems to have it all planned out. Like my mom and her new boyfriend, and El and Mike getting engaged and Dustin with his new fancy job and Will up in New York and I just...”

Max paused and Lucas turned to look at her, seeing her sniffle and wipe at her eyes.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said quietly, instinctively wrapping his arm around her shoulders, hoping it was the right thing to do. He hoped it was, since Max leaned against his side, letting out a shaky breath into the fabric of his coat. He slowly rubbed her arm, giving her time as her breathing slowly got steadier. After a minute Max sighed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know where that came from. We were supposed to have a fun weekend without worrying about things too much, and now I’m having an existential crisis when we’re supposed to be making out or something.”

Lucas let out a quiet laugh.

“It’s okay. This hasn’t been a normal couple of days anyway. Might as well have a crisis,” Lucas pointed out, hoping to cheer her up.

Max pulled away a bit, lifting her head up from where it had leaned against his side, but still letting him hold her.

“I guess. I just hoped this would’ve gone smoother. Just being spontaneous and fun without much thought,” she explained.

“We still have two days to do that,” Lucas pointed out and Max nodded, wiping her eyes again.

“You’re right.”

She turned to face him properly, blinking up at him as the large snowflakes kept landing on her face.

"So. We've got two days. We can pick up where we left off, you know, like a victory lap. And then after that I go back to San Diego and you go back to Chicago and we pretend like this never happened."

"That's okay with me."

"Okay."

They fell into silence, the snow quietly falling around them in the dark winter night, the air around them stilling, waiting. Before Lucas could decide on his next move, he saw Max smirk as her gaze fleeted over his face.

"What?" he asked, her smile contagious as it lit up on her cold-flushed face.

"You've got snow, like, all over your hair," Max explained, leaning up and bringing her hand up to brush snow off. The way she did it so naturally, how close she was, like the past couple of years hadn't even happened, it made it hard for him to breathe for a second. Wanting to seem unaffected, as not to freak her out, Lucas returned her comment:

"You're the one to talk, I can barely see your hair, it's so covered in snow."

Max's hand stilled where she was wiping snow away at the side of his head and her eyes shot up, like she would be able to see the snowflakes clinging to the top of her head. A snowflake landed on the little wrinkle between her eyebrows and Lucas wanted nothing more than kiss it. He slowly reached his hand over, his touch careful and light as he brushed away snow from the top of her head. He could feel her eyes fixed on him the whole time, and he gulped, trying to come up with another comment to lighten the mood again, to break the heavy hanging tension. But before he had come up with one, he felt Max's hand on his cheek, pulling his face down and then she leaned up to meet him and set her lips on his. His hand fell to hold

her waist to keep her steady against him, feeling the cool skin of her cheek brush against his and kissed her back, hoping it would help her get warm in the cold snowy night. They would need to head back soon. But not just yet.

3. And the road not taken looks real good now

December 25th

Max was surprised by how well the Christmas morning went. It was just her and her mom, slowly opening presents as old Christmas movies played on tv on the background. She couldn't help but feel a little guilty for not having spent the holidays with her mom since moving back west, but her mom kept on assuring her that she didn't mind, and that she was just happy to have her in Hawkins now. And Max was happy to be back. She really was.

The day passed by, relaxed and slow and warm, and after having their small Christmas dinner, Max's mom started to get ready to go into the city to meet her friend. Max in her turn had flopped down on the living room couch, watching "It's a Wonderful Life" and eating from a box of chocolates Mom had gotten as a gift from her work. As the credits rolled for the movie, she stretched her arms above her head, looking out the window and the darkness beyond the colorful lights of the porch. She hadn't heard from Lucas yet today, not apart from a Merry Christmas text early in the morning. Last night had been really great. The snowfall, the driving along the empty roads with him, the frozen quarry, the conversation they'd had. How the snowflakes had landed onto his dark hair and lashes, how he'd smirked and laughed, looking down at her, his eyes familiar and warm. It had been beyond great.

Max got up, making her way down the hallway to her mom's room. She was stood in front of the mirror, wearing a dark blue cocktail dress and focused on working on her hair and Max stopped at the doorway, leaning against the frame.

"So where are you going for the date?" she asked, popping another chocolate into her mouth.

"It's not a —" Mom started, looking over at Max, but seeing the look she was shooting her way, she sighed, looking forward at the mirror again, seeming like she'd decided to drop the act.

"We're going to this lounge type place, it looks quite fancy though, so

I'm worried I'll be underdressed," she explained, re-pinning a gold hair clip onto her hair.

"You look great, Mom. Don't worry about it," Max assured her.

"I'm trying not to," she replied, sighing as she took a step back, examining her reflection.

"There, how's that?" she asked, turning to Max, smoothing the fabric of her dress, turning her head so Max could get a better look of her wavy hair, half pulled back with a clip.

"You look really nice, you'll fit right in at a swanky lounge," Max assured her and she smiled, still a little nervous but visibly relieved too.

"Thank you, sweetie," she replied, turning towards the mirror again.

"So, any plans for tonight?"

Max shrugged, picking out another chocolate from the box.

"Not really. Might go see some friends, but nothing much," she said. She was not about to tell her mom about whatever was going on with her and Lucas. No way.

"Okay, well, I hope you'll have a nice time anyway. You can take the night to just relax, there's plenty of leftovers in the fridge as you know," Mom explained, going to pick up her purse.

"We'll be staying at a hotel overnight so I think I'll be back tomorrow around noon," she continued.

"But I can come back earlier if you want? Don't want you to feel lonely all by yourself," Mom worried, coming over to Max.

"Don't worry about that, Mom. You take your time at your romantic holiday getaway, enjoy it," Max told her. Mom smiled at her, reaching out her hand to rub her shoulder gently.

"I will. But please don't hesitate to text me if you need anything at all."

"Mom, I'm 21. I'll be fine staying at home for one night," Max pointed out and Mom smiled, drawing her hand back.

"Alright, alright. I trust you," she said, picking up a chocolate from the box before starting to walk along the hallway.

It didn't take long after her mom drove off with a wave goodbye and a slightly nervous but excited smile that Max got out her phone, going to text Lucas. He was having extended family over for dinner, he'd told her last night, but he'd said he should be able to sneak away after eight. Max sent him a short text, asking if he was free yet, and then flopped down on her back on her bed, pressing her phone against her chest. Here she was again, sneaking behind her mom's back to spend time with Lucas. She thought she'd be over that by now, but apparently it was another old habit that died hard. Another one being how easily she'd gotten lost in his dark eyes and warm kisses. God, she felt like a high schooler again.

Her phone dinged with a message and Max quickly checked it, seeing that Lucas would be there in twenty minutes.

The car windows were starting to slowly fog up as they sat at the empty parking lot opposite the main street park, the bright colorful lights of the street side decorations lighting up their faces. Max had her feet up on the dashboard, a tin of Lucas's mom's gingersnap cookies in her lap and a half-eaten cookie in her hand. She took a bite and looked over at Lucas who was in the middle of telling a funny story of something that had happened over Christmas dinner. His expressions were animated, and he was gesturing with his hands as he was lost in recounting the story and Max couldn't stop looking at him. The red and blue and gold of the lights across the street were reflecting onto his face, painting beautiful colors and shadows against his skin, and his smile was easy and the collar of his shirt peeking from under his coat was slightly crooked after a long day. And she wasn't a 100% sure she was following the story he was telling, but it didn't really matter, she was just lost listening to him, feeling so warm and comfortable in his presence.

He finished the story with a punchline and Max laughed along to it,

leaning her head back against the seat headrest, feeling so light and warm and cozy. The laughter slowly faded away into a comfortable silence and Max finished the rest of the cookie, wiping crumbs onto her jeans. She turned the cookie tin in her hands, trailing the Christmas figurines on its side with her finger.

"I've missed your mom's food. Please tell her Merry Christmas from me," she said, looking over at Lucas. He was already looking at her, leaning back comfortably in his seat too.

"I will," he assured her, nodding slightly, not taking his eyes off of her. His eyes were a shade of deep brown Max swore she'd never seen anywhere else in her life.

"Does she know you're with me? Or the rest of your family?" Max found herself asking, not really sure why. Lucas looked taken aback by her question, clearly not sure what to say, so Max decided to help him out, continuing:

"Cause my mom doesn't know. I figured it would be too much of a hassle to fill her in on this since it's so temporary anyway."

"Right, yeah, that's what I was thinking too. I haven't told them," Lucas quickly echoed, looking ahead.

"I mean, I told them I was spending time with friends, but wasn't that specific," he continued and Max nodded.

"That's fair."

"It's a bit of a shame though, it would've been nice to get to see your family. I always liked them," Max said after a while, starting to work on another cookie.

"And they always liked you," Lucas replied and Max turned to look at him again. The lights of the park were blue now, and it fit the undercurrent of nostalgia somehow.

"Even Erica?" Max countered, pulling her legs down from the dashboard and up onto her seat.

"Yeah. She's always thought you were cool. Way too cool for me at

least," Lucas said and Max huffed, reaching out her hand to gently punch his shoulder.

"You're cool. The second coolest person currently in this town," she told him.

"The first being..."

"Me."

"Obviously, just wanted to make sure."

They both let out soft laughs before falling into a comfortable silence again. The lights of the park changed their color and the odd car drove by and Max couldn't help her mind from wandering. Wondering what it would be like if they still lived in Hawkins. If she'd stayed. If they were still together. Would they have moved back, gotten a house on Maple Street, settled down...

"What are you thinking about?" Lucas asked, his gentle curiousness apparent again. Max weighed her options for a second, figuring if she should tell him or not. Maybe it was too much to suddenly spring on him. But they weren't going to see each other after tomorrow anyway, so how much damage it could really do?

"Do you ever wonder..." she started, settling in her seat to turn and face him better.

"If I didn't go back to California, if I had stayed. Would we have stayed together?"

Lucas kept his eyes on the park across the street, but Max saw his expression shift in thought. After a moment he said:

"Sometimes."

"Well let's say we did," Max said, looking ahead at the park too.

"Would we have moved back here? Gotten a house and all that," she asked, trying to sound casual and calm about it. Because these were all hypotheticals they were talking about, right?

"Maybe? My family's here so if you would've been okay with it then... I guess we could've?" Lucas answered, glancing over at her. Wait, was he saying...

"If I was - But, what if I didn't want to come back here?" Max asked, her brow furrowing in confusion, wanting to make sure she knew what he meant.

Lucas shrugged, turning to look at her properly as he said:

"Then I guess we would've moved to California."

"You would do that for me?" Max asked, her voice small, genuinely surprised and impressed. Lucas had lived in the Midwest his whole life, it was where all his family were. She'd never even dared to ask him to think about moving across the whole country for her. It was so much to ask of someone.

"Of course," Lucas replied, his answer quick and clear and unwavering, like it was something he'd thought about before and Max was left absolutely speechless by it.

"If that was what was best for us both, then sure. Hawkins is my home and where my family is, but you know, if it was you and me, we could make it work, wherever we were," Lucas explained and Max found herself leaning towards him, being drawn in by his words. They were all a total surprise; she hadn't expected them at all. Plus, she wasn't sure how smart it was for her to cling to them right now. But she couldn't bring herself to care. Not when he was leaning in towards her too, his eyes steady on hers.

Lucas reached his hand out to her, the touch of his fingers incredibly gentle as he cupped her cheek, his thumb softly brushing against her cheekbone. Max couldn't help her eyes from slipping shut and a shiver from zipping through her at his warm touch.

"Shit, you're right, it's getting cold again, we should go, I don't want you to freeze like yesterday," Lucas quickly said, seeming like he'd noticed her shivering, going to pull his hand away. Max quickly opened her eyes, catching his retreating hand in hers.

"Wait!"

Lucas turned his head back to meet her eyes, already going to turn the key in the ignition. Max let out a breath, deciding if she really was doing this. But she had to. If she didn't, the ache she had for him deep in her chest, the one that had been there longer than she'd care to admit out loud, would eat her alive.

"My mom won't be back at the house until tomorrow. If you want to, you can..." her sentence trailed off, she was once again not ready to say the words out loud. But once again he knew just what she meant, what she needed from him.

"Okay."

4. And the heart I know I'm breakin' is my own

December 26th

Lucas wasn't sure what rouse him from his sleep in the middle of the night. Maybe it was a train passing by outside, or snow falling from the roof and onto the ground outside the window. But regardless, he found himself awake, blinking his eyes open in the darkness of the room around him. For a moment he was confused, not sure of where he was. But then he recognized the seashell lamp hanging above the bed, saw the old posters on the wall, the clutter atop the old dresser, and realized where he was. And then he felt a wave of uneasiness flood over him; staying overnight at Max's house had always been rare, and for a second he panicked, worried her mom was gonna walk into the room and kick him out. But then the memory of last night came back to him, and he remembered that she wouldn't be home in another twelve hours. His moment of confused panic over, Lucas let out a breath, sinking back down onto the mattress. He brought his hand up to set his pillow better but as he did, he turned his head to the side and saw Max's sleeping head on the pillow next to his. Woah.

Seeing her like that, calm and asleep next to him, had always messed with his head. She always put on a tough face, seeming cool and bold and brazen, it was rare to see her vulnerable like this. It almost felt forbidden, like he wasn't allowed to look right at her. It wasn't because of anything she'd ever said to him though, on the contrary, when he'd admitted to her that's how he felt, on a late night sometime four years ago, she'd smiled at him and flicked his nose, saying that he had nothing to worry about. But he still felt it, especially now, getting to share her bed after the years that passed. She looked peaceful as she slept, on her side, one hand tucked under the pillow, her shoulders slowly moving in time with her deep breaths. Her hair was down and through the darkness of the room Lucas could see a strand of hair laying against her cheek, curled up right upto the corner of her mouth. He really wanted to reach his hand over and tuck it back for her, but stopped himself, not wanting to move and wake her up. Instead he set his head on his pillow, quietly watching her slow and calming breathing, still not quite

believing this was all real.

Lucas must have fallen asleep, since the next time he opened his eyes, the bedroom was much lighter than it had just been, the pale grey winter light coming in through the slants of the blinds. He brought up his hand to rub at his tired eyes before flopping his arm back down onto the mattress beside him. But when he did, he found it empty and he quickly turned his head to the side, only to see Max really was gone from the bed, only the pillow and her side of the covers left. His heart sank for a minute, his brain starting to spin him doomsday scenarios of how she'd changed her mind about all this overnight and left town already. But then he heard the sound of a door opening and closing in the hallway, and soon Max appeared in the doorway of the bedroom, holding a hair tie in her mouth as she twisted her hair up into a bun above her head. And her casually standing there, in her sweatpants and a UC San Diego t-shirt, in the pale morning light? He was not entirely sure he wasn't still dreaming.

"Morning," Max said, taking the hair tie and going to put it on. Her fingers were swift as they moved with practiced ease, gathering up her hair and wrapping the tie to secure it, all the while the soft morning light caught the strands of her copper hair.

"Did you sleep okay?" she added, giving her bun a couple tucks and then focusing back on Lucas when he still hadn't said anything.

"Oh, yeah I did, no complaints," he quickly spoke up, nodding his head, sitting up a bit.

"Okay good, I was worried I would accidentally kick you off the bed. I'm not that used to having to share one these days," Max explained, walking across the room to the bed.

"Oh, well, I didn't notice anything like that so I think you're good," Lucas replied and she smiled faintly as she went to her bedside table picking up a tin of lip balm. She uncapped it and applied some on casually, taking her time, looking out the window at the grey air outside. And all the while Lucas kept his eyes on her, not able to look

away just in case this wasn't real after all. He still wasn't quite awake and it all felt like a blur; them sitting in the car eating Christmas cookies, the colorful lights of the park shining on her face in the dark, her eyes on him, their intense gaze pulling him in and in through the front door of her quiet house.

"So, I texted my mom," Max spoke up after a moment.

"I asked her about her date last night and her plans for today," she added, screwing the lid back on the lip balm, setting it back down on the table.

"And she said she'll stay for lunch in the city. So she won't be back for hours."

"So I was thinking..." she drew out her words, her light tone marked with just a bit of mischief as she sat back on the bed.

"Maybe we could just have a lazy day, you know, like that one time when your family was away and we stayed in bed playing video games until it was like three pm," she explained, pulling the covers back over herself and turning to face Lucas, a grin on her face.

"In Senior year," Lucas said, not sure why that had been the one thing he found himself answering to. Max nodded, settling to lay on her side on the bed, propping her head up with her elbow on the pillow.

"So, what do you say?"

"Sure, let's do it, I'm not in a hurry to go anywhere," he answered, and it was half true; yes, he should go home and start packing for the trip to see his grandparents, but he still had the whole night to do that, he could stay a little longer. Especially now that he saw the warmed morning flushed cheeks and the happy, contented smile on Max's face, just inches from his.

"Good," she said, reaching forward to trail her fingers along his cheek and chin before leaning in to catch his lips in hers in a kiss that was just like the morning, slow, warm and languid. He kissed her back, gently pulling her closer by her waist and tasting the faint cherry of her lip balm, pretty much convinced now that he was still dreaming.

After a moment their kisses trailed off and Max pulled away slightly, settling to lay atop his chest.

“Well, what do you say about the room? The house? Is it like you remembered it?” she asked, crossing her arms and propping her chin up on them to look at him inquisitively. Lucas’s gaze swept over the room before returning back to her.

“I guess it looks pretty much the same, but there’s less of your things in here, like your bedside lamp, and your books,” he laid out his observations. Max nodded along.

“Yeah, those are in my apartment in San Diego. Though the old Xbox is still in the basement somewhere if you want to dig it out and play?” she said and Lucas huffed out a quiet laugh. They’d probably spent hundreds of hours on that thing.

“I still got my old console in my room too, I swear my mom intends to keep the whole room as a high school Lucas time capsule, literally nothing’s changed in there,” he told Max.

“That sounds sweet,” she pointed out with a soft smile.

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t mind having some new sheets, or putting away some of the science fair trophies,” he pointed out and Max breathed out a laugh, rolling her eyes at him. It was her eyeroll of amused endearment, one of his favorites.

“You earned those trophies fair and square, they deserve to be displayed,” she said, continuing, the corner of her mouth lifting up in a smirk:

“And since you don’t have any basketball trophies to show off...”

“Woah okay, that was low!” Lucas cut in, sitting up onto his elbows, his eyes wide and his brows raised in faked outrage.

“And besides I’ve got the ribbon from when we got fifth place in Junior year,” he added, poking at Max’s arm pointedly.

“Okay fair,” she said, sitting up too.

"I guess it's not your fault that the team sucked."

"Thank you, it's not!" Lucas exclaimed and Max shook her head with a faint smirk, settling to sit on her knees on the bed, looking out the window again. After a moment she said:

"It's a shame I couldn't go see your room, wouldn't mind a high school time capsule."

Lucas nodded along as she turned to look back at him.

"But I guess this is enough of a time capsule," she added, gesturing between the two of them, moving back closer to him.

"You're right," Lucas said as Max lifted her arms to loosely link them behind his neck.

"You can keep it here in your room and I'll have mine with my science fair trophies," he added, his hands finding her waist.

"I think I got the better deal," Max said, her voice not much louder than a whisper as she leaned in, her lips a mere inch from his.

"You did," Lucas just had the time to reply before she set her lips gently on his.

The hours rolled by slowly and lazily, but around noon Lucas finally needed to get up for the bathroom and Max used the time to get them both a cup of coffee. And so they got back to bed, watching some reality show reruns on the old tv on the top of Max's dresser, and sat up against the headboard as they sipped their coffees.

"How is it? Did I get it right?" Max asked, setting her cup down and nodding over at the one in Lucas's hand.

"It's great, thanks," he said, genuine.

"Okay good, I was pretty sure I remembered how you liked it. With one sugar and just a bit of milk, right?" Max confirmed, her eyebrows up expectantly as she looked up at him. And Lucas felt his heart swell, a warmth spreading all through him. Because she'd remembered

it exactly right.

“Yeah,” he replied, the word leaving him along with an awed breath. She smiled, leaning up towards him and setting the lightest of kisses just at the edge of his jaw. Then she leaned away again, her eyes flickering to meet his, all content and calm and happy. And it left Lucas absolutely speechless, his mouth hanging open uselessly as he stayed captivated by her.

“What?” Max asked in a soft laugh, tilting her head as she looked at him.

“I—,” he started, still at a loss of words.

“I’m just... really happy to be here right now.”

“Me too. And I’m really happy to be here with you,” Max said, her cheeks flushing as she averted his gaze for a second; she’d always found it difficult to be frank about her feelings, though she’d gotten better over the years. Knowing that, it meant even more to him to hear her say it. That she was as happy to be here with him as he was. It made him somehow love her even more than he already did.

Wait.

That was — he wasn’t supposed to —

But there was no denying it. He loved her, he’d never really stopped, not really. He loved her. And maybe he’d known it for a while now in the back of his mind, but it wasn’t until she had wrapped him in this calm, peaceful, cozy bubble of morning light and warm blankets and warm touches that he finally realized it.

And as soon as that realization came to him, his insides turned to ice. Because he knew he couldn’t tell her, it would be useless and only hurt her to tell her something like that now. This wasn’t going to last, they were playing pretend for a weekend, acting like they were still together. It would all end tomorrow. And the fact that he loved her wouldn’t do anything to change that. It would only bring the pain of the breakup right back. He couldn’t do that to her.

Max turned back to look at him again and seeing him still silent – not

knowing it was for a completely different reason now – she chuckled, leaning up to kiss him again before settling close against his side, dropping her head against his shoulder, her hand clasping together with his. And Lucas felt sick.

They finished their coffees, silently watching some home renovation show as the morning slowly crawled into the day. As another commercial break began, Max yawned, stretching her arms above her head before flopping back down onto the bed, her upper body laying across Lucas's legs. He set his empty cup on the bedside table as she got settled, propping a pillow under her head.

“This okay?” she asked him and he gave her a quick nod and a smile in reply. It was more than okay, but with the sinking feeling that had settled over him, he didn’t know what to think. He didn’t ever want to leave, but at the same time he felt like he’d ruined this all. Max turned onto her side to continue watching tv and Lucas did the same, trying to sit still and not let her see the prickly anxiety that was brewing underneath his skin. After a moment Lucas heard Max let out a sigh and he could tell what was coming, screwing his eyes shut.

“Are you okay? It seems like there’s something up with you all of a sudden?” Max asked, turning on her back to look up at him. Lucas gulped, not sure what to say. Because he wasn’t sure what exactly was wrong with him either. She looked genuinely concerned, and he could’ve just lied, said it was nothing, eased her mind. But...

“What are we doing?” he asked a question back, sighing in dismay, frustration creeping into sadness. Max knit her brows together so he continued:

“I just need to know... I’m leaving town tomorrow morning. And you’re going back to California, so... after that... What does this even mean?”

Max was silent, her face unreadable as she got up, looking away from him. And Lucas felt like shit for ruining the moment, but he needed to bring it up, he couldn’t continue ignoring it. Because he loved her and needed to know what she wanted from him so he knew what to feel, how to go on after tomorrow.

“I don’t know,” Max mumbled quietly, shrugging. And Lucas could tell she was uncomfortable with this, once again, this whole being upfront and facing your feelings thing wasn’t something she did. But he really needed her to meet him in the middle here, to help talk this through, to figure it out.

“Because I know we agreed on light and breezy and temporary, but I...” Lucas started, but Max cut him off.

“Yeah, and that’s it. I already left this town, as did you, and tomorrow we’re gonna leave again and that will be all. What else could it be?” she said, her tone cold, still not turning to face him. And the coldness of her words immediately seeped into Lucas too, an angry, disappointed freeze settling over him.

“Fine then,” he said, already finding himself getting out of bed, the anger leading him, his reasonable brain too late to follow. He knew they needed to talk about this properly, but he just couldn’t do it now.

“I’ll just leave now, no reason to draw this out any further if you’re already ready to leave,” he added, going to quickly grab his clothes from the floor, pulling them on as he spoke.

“For fucks sake Lucas, you knew from the start this was only going to be a weekend thing, I thought we made it clear. Why are you making a big deal out of it all of a sudden?” Max yelled out, getting up from the bed as Lucas pulled on his coat and started heading out the door. He stopped in the doorway, his one hand gripping the door frame as he paused, turning back to look at her. She was standing by the bed, next to the messy sheets and pillows and blankets he’d just been so comfortable and happy in. And he could tell she was angry and frustrated like he was, but he knew her, could see the fear and the sadness in her expression too. And he wanted to tell her what this was all about, that he hadn’t lied when he agreed on keeping this a temporary thing, when he said he was fine with it staying like that. But he’d simply underestimated the love he had for her all these years later, and when the force of it had caught up with him, he just couldn’t keep his word anymore. He didn’t just want the weekend. He wanted it all, with her. But the time for that was over. It wasn’t possible anymore. So, to spare her for feeling the same heartache he

was, he said:

“I just don’t want to do this anymore.”

And then he turned and walk out the door, out the house, his heart breaking along every step.

5. And it always leads to you in my hometown

December 27th

There was a ring at the door and soon Erica ran past Lucas's open doorway to go get it. The Christmas present she'd ordered for Mom hadn't arrived on time and all she'd talked about for the past two days was how she hoped it would be delivered before they left for grandma's. So Lucas wasn't surprised to see her make a beeline for the door, not paying it much attention as he continued to pack his bag, trying to remember everything he needed for the trip. He'd told his mom he'd spent all of last night in his room getting the packing done, while in reality he'd been just... Well, to be honest, looking back he wasn't really sure what he'd been doing for the whole night once he'd gotten back home. He just remembered heading straight for his room and falling face first into bed and not getting up until he was called down for dinner. He'd like to say he'd been thinking about what had happened with Max, thought things through, but that would be giving him too much credit. He'd just wasted the entire half a day, staring up at the ceiling, weighed down by a numbness after everything that had happened the past couple days.

Lucas sighed, rumbling a sweatshirt he was holding in his hands, sitting down on the bed next to his duffle bag. He really didn't know what to do. There was a heavy feeling of dismay that had settled into the pit of his stomach yesterday when he'd realized his unfortunately timed feelings for Max. It kept weighing him down, slowing his brain, making all his movements sluggish and robotic. Shit, he couldn't even focus on packing a bag. He heard Erica's excited voice as she closed the front door and headed into the kitchen with the package, calling Mom over to open it. Lucas pushed himself up from the bed and forced himself to continue packing, telling himself that he was almost done and could soon join everyone else downstairs. They still didn't know anything about what he'd been up to for the past couple days — they thought he'd been spending time with Dustin and Mike. If he kept on moping like this, they'd be sure to get suspicious. Lucas turned to grab his phone charger from his bedside table when he heard the doorbell ring again. He stopped, furrowing his brow in confusion. Again? How many packages did Erica order? He dropped

the charger into the open duffel bag and went to the doorway, peeking his head through to look at the hallway, looking down the stairs to the front hall where he saw Erica heading over to the door again. He started to lean back and go back to finish his packing since she already got the door, but stopped when he heard her let out a surprised:

“Oh, Hi?”

Curious, Lucas leaned back into the hallway, trying to see who was at the door, but Erica was blocking the doorway. But he didn’t have to wait for long, as she soon turned to look back at him, her eyes wide and her brows high up in a million questions. And then he saw who was at the door.

“Hey,” Max said, looking beyond uncomfortable and tense, giving him an awkward nod of her head as she stuffed her hands into her coat pockets. And Lucas had no idea what he should say, what he should do. What was she even doing here? He’d figured that after yesterday he’d be the last person she’d want to see. Caught totally off guard, Lucas wasn’t sure if he was angry to see her, or happy, or sad; or all three. He just blinked, trying to form a response, all the while he felt Erica’s questioning gaze boring into his skull.

“Hi,” he finally managed to get out, stepping into the hallway.

“So? You got them?” Erica asked him, her words expectant and Lucas was even more confused as to what was going on.

“Huh?”

“Max said she’s here to get her headphones back? That you accidentally took them when you guys were hanging out at Dustin’s on Christmas Eve?” Erica elaborated, turning back to look at Max who nodded along, confirming what she was saying. Lucas, having reached the stairs now, let his brows furrow for a second. What headphones? Erica turned her head quickly to look back at him and he was about to voice his question but then he saw Max’s face from behind Erica, her teeth gritting together and her pale eyes wide. Begging him to just go along with it. And even if he still hadn’t quite figured out how he felt about seeing her again, he knew to follow her

lead on this. Because if he didn't, Erica would launch into endless questions about what was really going on. And he didn't want to put Max through all that.

"Oh, right, I've got them in my room, just a sec," Lucas replied, stopping halfway down the stairs, and turning to go back into his room.

"I'll come help you," Max called out, squeezing past Erica, and pulling off her boots before following him. Lucas didn't turn back to look, but he knew Erica's jaw must've been on the floor. And he already knew that the four-hour family car trip later was going to be pure torture with all the questions she'd be launching his way.

Getting back into his room, Lucas said, knowing Erica could still probably hear him:

"They must be in my pocket or something, let me get my coat..."

He started to rummage through his already packed bag, trying to find a pair of headphones to give Max so Erica wouldn't get suspicious, but then Max got into the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Don't worry about that, I've got them here, we can pretend that you gave them back to me if Erica asks," she explained in a hushed and hurried tone, taking out a tangled pair of headphones from her pocket and showing them to him.

"Oh, okay," Lucas nodded, his hands stilling where they'd been rifling through the clothes in the bag. There was a beat of silence as he straightened his back from where he'd been leaning over the bag on the bed. He turned to look at Max who was also silent, awkwardly holding her arm as she studied the room around her.

"You were right, you know," she spoke up.

"About what?"

"About your mom keeping your room as a high school you time capsule," she added, slowly walking over to his desk, picking up his sixth-grade science fair trophy. Lucas watched as she turned it in her

hands, the corner of her mouth lifting up just a bit. Lucas let out a short huff in acknowledgement and Max turned to meet his gaze, her eyes locked with his, her face framed by wavy strands of hair spilling from under her green beanie. Lucas could feel his heart clench, and for a second he almost forgot their argument from yesterday. But as he remembered it, he felt the cold numb feeling coming back.

“Max...” he started, her name leaving him along with a breath of resignation. He really needed to know what was going on.

“Why are you here?”

“I...” Max started, pausing as she set the trophy back down and wrung her hands together.

“I guess I just... Needed to see you, to talk to you one last time before you left.”

“Yesterday...” she continued and Lucas found himself cutting in, saying:

“I’m sorry for storming out like that, I shouldn’t have made it such a big deal.”

“What, no, you had every right to get mad at me, I totally get it. You don’t have to apologize for that,” Max hurried to say. Lucas met her eyes, seeing the honesty in them. He nodded, looking away, letting her continue.

“It just... caught me off guard, I guess. When you asked about what we were going to do after the holidays were over, about where we stood. It freaked me out,” Max continued after a moment.

“Which is not your fault, I get why you brought it up. I just didn’t see it coming, so I didn’t react the best way. And I’m sorry,” she finished and when Lucas turned to meet her eye again, he saw her already looking at him, her expression honest in its remorse.

“And I just needed to tell you that before you left, that’s all,” she added, looking away from him as she shoved her hands into her jeans’ pockets. Looking over at the door to the bedroom, she started

again, her voice hurried and awkward:

“So, um, that’s all. I’ll leave you to pack I guess, wouldn’t want to stay too long to make your family suspicious.”

She turned towards the door to leave and seeing it set Lucas in motion. He’d watched her leave out of his life once before without telling her everything he had to say, he wasn’t going to make the same mistake again.

“Max, wait,” he spoke out, taking a step towards her as if to catch her before she slipped away yet again. Max turned her head back to look at him, fragile hopefulness flashing in her eyes for just a second before the nervousness came back. Lucas made his way over to her, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to figure out what to say. How to form all the thoughts swirling around in his brain into words.

“About you getting freaked out yesterday...” he started with.

“I completely understand why, and I forgive you. I know how hard it is for you to talk about these things without warning, and I sprung it up on you, I shouldn’t have done that. I guess I just...” his sentence trailed off as he stopped to consider his words, all the while Max took a step closer to him, close enough that she now had to lift her face up to look him in the eye. She didn’t say anything, listening to him intently, her gaze fixed on him, letting him speak. It helped coax the next words out of him.

“I was really happy yesterday. It was so nice, just getting to be together, just you and me, without having to think about the outside world. And I know the timing isn’t right and that I’m about to leave but... I guess it just made me realize that I...” Lucas paused again, his throat dry as the words that he’d realized yesterday were fighting their way out. He blinked, looking down at Max, gathering his strength.

“That I still—”

“Me too,” she spoke, her words hushed and careful, as if she was afraid to let them out.

“You—” Lucas started, not sure if she was saying what he thought she was. What he was hoping she was.

“Yes,” Max said, pursing her lips together in uncertainty, scanning his face for his reaction, worried.

“I do, I realize it now, and I think that’s what made me freak out yesterday,” she explained, her voice hurried and a little frantic.

“Because I shouldn’t, right? We’re broken up, we both decided it was the rational thing to do. But after these couple of days, hell, way before that as well...” her sentence faltered off as a blush crept up to her cheeks and she looked away.

“Well, maybe breaking up was the best thing to do at the time. But that was years ago, maybe... Maybe things have changed,” Lucas said, slowly and carefully extending his hand towards her, her touch light as her fingers wrapped lightly around his.

“Maybe. But what hasn’t changed is the fact that we still live on opposite sides of the country,” Max said, sighing in frustration before looking back up at him.

“It doesn’t change the fact that I have no idea what I’m going to do with my life and I’ve got nothing figured out. And that scares me. I’m scared of what all that distance and all that uncertainty could do to us, that’s why I’m still... That’s why I still can’t say those words out loud,” she admitted, her voice getting hushed again. Maybe she was worried his family would hear her, or maybe it was her own fear, being afraid to admit these things out loud. Whatever it was, Lucas needed to make sure she knew he understood her, heard her.

“You don’t have to say them,” he assured her, squeezing her fingers reassuringly.

“I don’t know what will happen after the holidays. I can’t tell you what will happen to us. And I have no idea what I’m doing either. But I do know that I don’t want to let go of you, of us, again. I do know that I...” he paused, not saying the rest of his sentence out loud like she’d asked, hoping she understood anyway. And it seemed like she did, judging by how her eyes softened and her thumb lightly

brushed across his knuckles.

"I know that too," Max echoed, a sad, fond smile on her still cold-nipped face and it made Lucas's heart ache. There was so much still left unsaid, so much uncertainty still hanging over them, over what would happen after today. But there was also happiness in that ache, and hopeful, frail optimism – that maybe, just maybe everything could turn out okay for them.

They stood in silence for a while, hands holding onto each other lightly, like that lightest of touches could help keep them anchored in this moment, to keep time still for just a while longer. To keep time from pulling them apart once again. But then there was a clattering sound from downstairs, nothing loud, just a sound of Lucas's mom getting their packed lunches ready for the drive, but it was enough to break the fragile quiet moment. Max must've heard it too, as she let out a sigh.

"Well, what do we do now?" she asked, looking up at him.

"We're gonna be heading out in about thirty minutes," Lucas said, looking over Max's shoulder at the closed bedroom door.

"And I'm pretty sure Erica is waiting right outside that door, ready to pin us with questions as soon as we get out of here," he added, his teeth grit and his brows lifted. He was not looking forward to that. Max had also turned her head to look at the door, turning back now to meet his eye, her teeth also grit nervously.

"I mean, we don't have to tell her. If we don't want to?" she pointed out with the slightest of smirks.

"Let's just... figure it out. We don't need to rush, we've got nothing but time," she continued with a shrug. She was right. Lucas had no idea when they would even get to see each other again, but they'd have all the time in the world to figure things out.

"Okay," he said, nodding in agreement. He looked down at their joined hands, swiping his thumb over her knuckles lightly, enjoying the luxury of feeling her close to him, something he soon wouldn't

have anymore.

"But we do need to get going soon or Erica is going to break down that door herself," Lucas spoke up after another tender moment of silence between them. Max huffed out a laugh before sighing again.

"Yeah, you're right. We should go," she agreed, nodding before looking back up at him.

"We really should," Lucas echoed, meeting her gaze, seeing the same tender hopefulness he was feeling reflected on her pale eyes as she looked at him. Maybe just one more moment...

"Lucas!" Max said with a laugh, shaking him awake.

"Okay, okay, let's go. I'll just grab my stuff and walk you out..." Lucas started to explain, finally dropping her hand and turning to grab his bag from the bed, swinging it over his shoulder. He quickly turned back, about to say something more but soon forgot what it even was, as Max was suddenly right there, her hands cupping his cheeks and her face just a few inches from his. And then she was kissing him, his eyelids fluttering closed as he kissed her right back. With her hands tenderly cradling his face and her soft lips moving together with his, Lucas felt just surrounded by everything that was her, reveling in the feeling, trying to commit every detail to memory.

Max eventually drew away, one hand still staying on his cheek, dropping her forehead to touch his.

"Was that for the road?" Lucas asked quietly and Max breathed out a laugh, her warm breath fanning across his lips.

"Yeah, I think so," she said, leaning away just far enough that she could meet his eyes, her thumb brushing against his cheekbone.

"Thank you," Lucas said.

"For the kiss?" Max asked, tilting her head to the side, laughter still on her lips.

"For everything. For reaching out, for wanting to see me again, for

everything these past couple days," he explained.

"But also for the kiss," he added with a smirk.

"Well you're very welcome," Max said with a smile of her own, leaning back up onto her toes to set another kiss on his lips, this one shorter but just as sweet.

"And thank you too. For agreeing to see me again," she added as she leaned away, her hands dropping to lay lightly against his chest.

"I couldn't stay away," Lucas said, knowing he sounded corny but not able to help himself. And he couldn't help himself even now, leaning down to capture her lips with his once more.

"We should seriously go before Erica actually takes a battering ram to your door," Max pointed out and Lucas sighed, pecking one more kiss to the corner of her mouth before leaning away.

"Okay, let's go," he said, picking up his bag and swinging it over his shoulder. And with a deep breath in preparation they were out the door.

As the car pulled off the driveway and started to head down Maple Street, Max stayed behind, standing by the curb, watching it drive away. She felt sad, watching it disappear around a bend in the road, but the feeling was eased by a sense of delicate hopeful optimism that has set over her since the conversation with Lucas. She'd been really nervous earlier as she'd gone and knocked on the Sinclair's door, she'd debated all morning whether she should do it or not. But she'd known she needed to do it. She couldn't let him go without coming clean. Having Erica open the door had nearly made her abort the mission and run off instantly, but now she was happy she'd stuck it through. More than happy.

Max sighed, figuring it was time she headed out, shoving her hands into her coat pockets as she walked to the car, parked by the curb. The air was cold and the wind biting, the grey clouds hanging low overhead, but she still couldn't fight the smile that stubbornly kept rising to her face. Because she'd told Lucas she still had feelings for

him, and he'd said it back. They had done this before, parted ways without knowing when they'd see each other again. But this time it would be different. She knew it. This time it wasn't him watching her leave and her sitting in the car with a million unsaid things, too scared and proud to say them out loud. Now she had been the one watching him go, but she'd done so with a much more hopeful mind. This time they both knew how they felt, they had agreed to put effort into making this thing of theirs work, to take it slow and give it time. As she got into the car, she gave up trying to reign in her giddy smile, thinking back to the happy and hopeful look on Lucas's face when she'd pulled away from kissing him, his gaze on her tender and so warm. Leaning her head back against the headrest, Max closed her eyes, focusing on the memory of their last kiss, sure she could still feel his soft lips on hers, a warm, sparkling feeling still lingering, softly emanating from her lips to all over her body, a comforting warmth in her chest.

There was a notification sound, and Max opened her eyes to dig out her phone, figuring it was her mom, asking her to pick up something from the grocery store on her way back. But it wasn't her mom. It was Lucas. And Max felt her heart stop as she read the text.

"i love you"

Followed quickly by:

"see, not saying it out loud"

And then again by:

"you don't have to say it back i just needed to tell you"

The backseat of the car was loud with Erica rattling on about something, luckily gotten over interrogating Lucas about what was going on between him and Max. But as she talked, Lucas just nodded along absentmindedly, his thoughts a million miles away – well about fifteen miles away really – as he stared out the window, gripping his phone in his hand, bouncing his knee anxiously, his teeth grit. That text had been a mistake. A total mistake, he'd ruined it already. He just hadn't been able to help himself, needing to tell Max how he felt.

He'd rationed with himself that a text would make it less serious, that it wouldn't freak her out. But it had been minutes since she'd read the text and she still hadn't answered him. And he was ready to toss his phone out the window. And maybe jump out right after it. He'd really messed this up.

He was almost too focused on beating himself up to realize his phone buzz with a reply. Panicked, he managed to drop the phone on the car floor, scrambling to pick it up from by his feet. Erica gave him a confused side-eyed look before focusing back on her story and Lucas tried his best to appear calm and collected as he finally got his phone, bringing it up to see what Max had said. But his efforts to appear calm were rendered useless as he opened the text, his heart beating a mile a minute as he read the words on the screen.

“high school parking lot, five minutes”

The parking lot in front of Hawkins High was still as grey, cold, and windswept as it had been just a few days ago. But this time when Max saw the Sinclair family car pulling up from the road, she got up, her steps resolute as she closed the car door behind her and walked across the cracked asphalt towards the car as it stopped, the engine left running. And as soon as it did, Lucas scrambled out, coming around the car, awkwardly glancing over at his family still sitting in the car, speaking quickly, apologizing for being a bit late, saying he only convinced his family to wait for a couple minutes. And Max shook her head at him, smiling as she gently tugged him closer by the lapels of his coat, looking up at him. That made his ramblings trail off and after one quick look back at the car he focused back on her.

“I’m sorry about the text, I know it wasn’t what we talked about, I just...”

“Lucas,” Max cut him off with a laugh.

“Huh?”

“I love you too,” she said, the words, though planned, managing to pull all the air from her lungs, the world stilling for just a second as she waited for him to react. And then he did, his eyes huge in

surprise and relief then flooding in as his gaze roamed her face, as if making sure she wasn't kidding.

"Yeah?" he asked, making sure, and his voice sounded so genuine, relieved, and happy that Max couldn't help but to bite down at her lip to suppress a smile, nodding as his eyes met hers again.

"Yeah. I love you," she repeated, a light giggle leaving her despite her efforts, the way Lucas was looking at her making her feel like she was floating somewhere high above the grey and cold town. He reached his hand up to cup her face, his dark eyes just flooding over with emotion, opening and closing his mouth as he searched for something to say. Finally settling on it, a bright smile lit up his face as he said:

"I love you too."

The words had just had time to leave him when he pulled her close, her eagerly leaning up to meet him. And then they kissed. It was light, and airy, genuine and warm and they had to break it after a second for how much they were both smiling. At the relief, the happiness and also the absurdity of it all. Because here they were, kissing in the middle of their old high school parking lot, right where they'd just met again after being apart for three long years, with Lucas's most likely very confused family waiting in the still running car just a couple feet away. And even if they were going to part ways again, even if there was a lot of explaining to do once he got back into the car, they were both the happiest they've been in the longest time. Because even if the holidays were soon to be over. They wouldn't be.

Notes for the Chapter:

Here it finally is, the last chapter of this story! I've had it half-written in my drafts since January but because of writer's block I haven't been able to get it finished, edited and posted until now. But I hope you still like it even after the long wait!